

# Burial Exposes Racial Rift in Texas

[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

2 mins read

**T**he corpse of a white woman whose 2007 killing barely made headlines is now at the center of a peculiar racial conflict over the desegregation of the cemeteries in a rural Texas county.

Black leaders in Waller County, northwest of Houston, say white county authorities deliberately sabotaged their efforts to have the woman's unidentified body buried in one of two public black cemeteries. Judge Owen Ralston, the county's top elected official and the man who decided where the woman would be interred, denies the accusation, insisting that cost — not race — led to her burial on Monday in a white cemetery.

"I had no idea what color the lady was and didn't care," Judge Ralston said. "There've been some bad racial situations in this county, but I've tried to be right about it. I'm not a racially motivated person."

Upon learning Wednesday night that the burial had taken place without his knowledge, a county justice of the peace, DeWayne Charleston, who is black, said, "I'm going to have that body exhumed."

Judge Charleston, who was initially legally responsible for dealing with the body, had ordered it handled by a black-owned funeral home, Singleton & Sons, and had asked a black minister to officiate at the burial.

Racial strife is a mainstay of this rural county of about 36,000 residents, 30 percent of whom are black, census figures show. Accusations of racial bias in such matters as access to polling places have been common in recent years. About five years ago, black leaders successfully sued the City of Hempstead, the county seat, for failing to provide the same upkeep of black cemeteries as white ones.

- Unlock more free articles.

[Create an account or log in](#)

Neither Judge Ralston nor Judge Charleston knew the woman, who was strangled and her body so badly disfigured that a crime laboratory in Houston spent a year trying, unsuccessfully, to identify her. The body, its face mutilated and hands severed, was found March 18, 2007, along a road in the part of Waller County over which Judge Charleston has jurisdiction.

Judge Charleston said that when he was notified last month that the crime laboratory was releasing the body for burial, he saw it as a chance to break the color barrier in the region's public cemeteries. On June 13, he assigned the task to Singleton & Sons.

"In my time as J.P., I've come to understand that I am to call black funeral homes to pick up black people, white funeral homes to pick up white people," said Judge Charleston, elected the county's first black justice of the peace in 2003. "I didn't want to cross that line when I was dealing with white bodies and the families were grieving, because I didn't want to make a political point out of cases like that. But here was a case where the body was unidentified. I believed this was it, this was the opportunity for the cemeteries to be integrated without offending anyone."

